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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Julie Piper, Carroll, Iowa
Karen Keninger
Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School, Vinton, Iowa
5-16-2011**

Karen Keninger: Well, good morning. My name is Karen Keninger, and I am here at the Iowa Braille School interviewing Julie Piper, who lives in Vinton. Julie, we're

going to be recording this interview, and I want to know if you agree to have this interview recorded?

Julie Piper: I do agree.

Keninger: Excellent. Julie, we're collecting this information for the Oral History Project that is part of the History of Blindness in Iowa Project that is being sponsored by the Iowa Department for the Blind, in conjunction with several grants from the Humanities Iowa and other places. And, our goal is simply to collect people's thoughts, memories; their ideas, their experiences for an oral history project that we will then make available for research and other kinds of purposes. And that's what we're about today.

Piper: Okay.

Keninger: Tell me a little bit about your background. Where are you from? Where did you grow up?

Piper: Actually, I was born near...Well actually, I was born in Carroll. My parents lived on a farm near Carroll, actually closer to West Side in Manning, down in there. And, I was born in Carroll, and they discovered right away that my eyes had not developed. And, they still really don't know for certain why. They're thinking that maybe it was due to Rubella that my mother may have come in contact with during her pregnancy. And so, they immediately told my parents. I was baptized in the hospital less than 24 hours after I was born, because they were uncertain whether or not I would live. They weren't sure if there were other problems besides that. My parents were told about the Iowa

Braille school and decided, after coming to see the campus, that I would be going to school here. And, they moved to Vinton when I was two and a half. And so, I've lived in Vinton ever since then.

Keninger: So, are your parents still living here?

Piper: My mother is. My father is deceased.

Keninger: So, you came to Vinton, then, as a kindergartener. I mean, to the school?

Piper: Yes.

Keninger: And, you went to school at the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School through your whole career?

Piper: Yes.

Keninger: Tell me about your experience here. Were you a day student or did you live in the dorm?

Piper: When we moved here, my parents had the understanding that I was going to be living in the dorm. But, they still felt that they wanted to live near the campus, so they could come and see activities and be near me. And, I think at the time when I enrolled the school was just sort of implementing the day student program, and told my parents that I could be a day student. And, our house is located about three blocks from campus, so we're very close.

Keninger: So, as a day student were you able to participate in the afternoon and evening activities that the other kids did, or were you pretty much at home?

Piper: I came up to school most every evening and basically I would, after classes were over, I would go back to the dorm and be with my friends until it was time to eat supper. And, then I would walk home and have supper and help do dishes and homework and come back to campus. So, I was here a lot.

Keninger: And, what kinds of activities were going on in the evenings that you would come back for?

Piper: Oh, we had swimming and bowling, all kind of recreation activities. Sometimes I would come back to campus just to be with my friends. We'd study in the dorms and, I'm trying to think, sometimes there would be concerts; band concerts, coral concerts that would go on in the evening off campus. So, I would be involved in that.

Keninger: So, extra-curricular activities for you in junior high and high school included band, chorus, those kinds of things?

Piper: Yes.

Keninger: Did you do any other kinds of things, drama or sports?

Piper: I was on the Student Council. I really wasn't involved too much in sports. I was out for swimming a couple of years.

Keninger: Okay. Did you have much commerce with the public school kids during your growing up?

Piper: I did from third grade through eighth grade. I attended catechism school classes at our church, and so I was with the public school kids through that experience. And then, I believe, starting my sophomore year we attended some classes down at the public school.

Keninger: As a...Several of you at once or did you go, were you the only kid in some of those public school classes?

Piper: Most of the time I was the only one in my class. There was one class, our Spanish class. The public school employed the lady that was teaching Spanish here. And so, rather than having Spanish here we just all went down to the public school. And, interestingly enough, I believe that was my senior year, I felt that the level of Spanish that we were speaking at was much higher than that of the public school students. I think the Spanish program here far outshined anything that was taught down at public school.

Keninger: Now, was that still Rosie Miner?

Piper: Yes.

Keninger: Okay. A good Spanish teacher.

Piper: Excellent.

Keninger: She was doing music at the same time, or at least part of that time as well?

Piper: Yes.

Keninger: So, you had pretty much a full academic curriculum here at the school through eighth grade?

Piper: Oh yes.

Keninger: They still had all the teachers and everything.

Piper: Yes.

Keninger: When did you graduate?

Piper: 1982.

Keninger: And, had the population begun to change by then, or were, was it still as it had been, say in the 50s, 60s?

Piper: It had begun to change. I really felt the change in, about, I would say 1976. I suspect it probably was changing prior to that, but as a young child I probably wasn't aware of it. But, in 1976/77 I really felt like it was beginning to change. And, I think where I noticed it the most, was when we would have Christmas programs and things like that here on campus. There would be selections that some of the special needs children would be in, and that was the most contact probably that I had with those children. And so, I

was able to see their abilities, and I knew that things were changing here.

Keninger: After you graduated from high school, what was next for you?

Piper: I attended Central College in Pella for a year, and it was quite an experience. I think, well, I graduated when I was 17. And, I wonder sometimes if that was, maybe, a mistake. I'm wondering if, maybe, I should have been enrolled in school one year later, therefore making me graduate at age 18. I think that 17-year-olds sometimes have a hard time growing into college. And, it was a good experience, but I think I could have gotten more out of it had I been a little more mature.

Keninger: Aha. Did you feel like, well, I'll preface this by saying I had a very rough freshman year in college. So, did you feel like you fit in there like the other kids were? You know, like you belonged there, or did you feel kind of isolated?

Piper: I think, for the most part, I felt like I belonged there. It was difficult for me to initiate social contact. I would not have been likely to go across the hall and ask the friendly girls, "Do you want to go down and have ice-cream at the ice-cream shop?" And, I think the reason for that at the time, which leads me back to my comment about becoming mature; it was my identification with blindness. I felt that had I gone across the hall and said, "Do you want to go have ice-cream," I was inconveniencing them, because they would have to be the leaders in getting us to the ice-cream

shop, because at first I didn't know my way, or they would have to be the leader in finding a place to sit. And, at that time it was something that I felt was sort of negative. I don't feel that way now at all. (Laughter)

Keninger: Sure, I understand that. So, you didn't go back to Central after that first year?

Piper: I didn't. I got married and lived out in Portland, Oregon for a while. And, then I came back and enrolled at Hawkeye Tech, I guess it's Hawkeye Community College, now, in Waterloo; and graduated from there in Business Office Clerical and data entry. I was the first blind graduate from there.

Keninger: How was that experience?

Piper: Oh, it was a very exhausting experience. I feel it was adequate in education as far as what I learned, but I felt that I had to do a lot of self starting. And, really for lack of a better term, staying in their faces basically, and saying, "Hey, I can do this." For example, when I went to the admissions to apply, the lady in there said, "Well, there's no way that you can do this; you're blind." What that did was generated a tremendous amount of anger. I'm not very good at being told I can't. (Laughter) My mom says I get that from my father, but I'm not sure. It doesn't matter where it came from.

But, I had a couple of strange experiences there. I felt like it was just, they didn't know what to do with a blind student. It would have probably helped had they had a coordinator for those with disabilities or something like that;

somebody to possibly mediate between, you know, go between the student and the professor. I had...My faculty advisor took me into her office, I think, this was my third trimester. We were putting together my schedule and she said, "There's no way that you can take Accounting. You're going to need to audit that class." And I said, "Well, I need Accounting to graduate, isn't that right?" And she said, "Yes, but there's no way that you can take it." And, unfortunately, we were at an impasse. She wouldn't sign me up for it. So, when the trimester started I went in and I went into the Accounting classroom and the teacher that was in there turned to me and said, "What are you doing here?" And I said, "I am doing the same thing as all of the other students in this room. I've heard you're a very good teacher, and I would appreciate it if you would help me find a place to sit." And, I was not there to audit the class. I went to the Registrar and I said, "I'm signing up for it. I'm taking it." And I got through it. I figured out how to type my journal entries. My sister was a big help in that. She explained to me how things were laid out, and I made it. And, the interesting thing is that teacher proved to be a wonderful ally after that. She was just a tremendous friend. She wrote me a beautiful letter after I graduated from there. So, I think it's a matter, sometimes, of having a good perception of what you can do and just sticking with it. Don't let people...Don't give up.

Keninger: Was that a 2-year program or a 1-year program?

Piper: It was 2-year.

Keninger: So, you got through that with a lot of persistence. Your other instructors you kind of had to do the same kind of pushing with?

Piper: Yes, to some extent I did. There was a couple of times when I really did feel like giving up. In fact, I had a couple of rides that I was...I was car pooling and I had some rides that the drivers dropped out of school, so I had to find other rides. It was quite an interesting thing.

Keninger: Talk about that. Transportation's like...You're living in Vinton, were you, at that time? And then going to, is it Waterloo?

Piper: Yes.

Keninger: What did you do to find rides? I know that's always an issue for people who don't drive, if they're blind or got other reasons. What did you do? How did you go about getting rides lined up?

Piper: I think...I'm trying to think back on that. I believe my first term, there was an ad in the paper of a girl living in town, and she wanted someone to carpool with so I responded to that. Well, that lasted about six weeks and she dropped out. So, I think what I did, my sister helped me make a sign with a picture of a car and all this type of thing, that would attract attention, and I put it up on the bulletin board. And, I did receive responses to that. One of the things that was done up at Hawkeye Tech, that was something I had to figure out a way to overcome, was they had a bulletin board in the hall. And, that was the means of

communication at that time. If you had to leave a note for another student, you put it on that board. Well, how in the world was I supposed to know if there was a note for me up there? I mean, it wasn't going to be prudent for me to ask every day, "Is there a note up there on the board?" So, what I did was I got a business size envelope, and I put my name on it with dymo tape, print dymo tape, and I stuck it on the bulletin board. And, there was a message on the envelope; that if you have a message for me, please place it in this envelope.

Keninger: Oh, how creative!

Piper: And, that worked out; it really did work. So, I mean, at least I would have an idea where those messages would be.

Keninger: Sure.

Piper: Sometimes I think that's what it is; so many times as a blind person you just have to come up with that other way. And, that is one thing we were taught to do up here at school. They were good about helping you figure out, or having you figure out ways of doing things.

Keninger: Can you think of other examples?

15:00

Piper: I think it was sort of a foundational thing, something we were taught; that you really weren't any different from anyone else. And so, just because you were blind you still

had to accomplish this thing. And so, you could come up with ways. And, I think my family really enforced that too; my parents. I remember one thing we were taught up here was when you vacuum your carpet do so barefoot, because you can sort of feel where you've been. And, if there are things on the floor you can find them with your feet, and I do that.

Keninger: Me too, actually. I never thought about it, but I do. (Laughter) You mentioned your family being real supportive. Talk to me about what you think the roll of families is in terms of how successful a person, a blind person particularly is, and how your family helped you to be outgoing and competent.

Piper: I think the roll of the family is very important, not only the parents, but also the siblings. I really don't believe my parents treated me any, they didn't coddle me. If I got into a fight with a sibling, it was basically you got into it, you get out of it. And, if you guys can't quit it, take it outside. It wasn't a deal where, oh, she's blind she might get hurt; that type of thing. I really think that my parents paid close attention to what the people up here at school said, and they did not go against that. And so, I think that helped as well. And, probably living near campus was a good thing. That way I could walk back and forth and just kind of like a sighted kid.

Keninger: Did you feel, or do you recognize now the real value of having both school and your family life together as opposed to some kids who didn't?

Piper: Absolutely. I do presentations up here at school for tour groups every now and then, and I tell them that I did have the best of both worlds. I was told that many, many times as a student, but I didn't realize what it meant. But, I definitely did have the best of both.

Keninger: So, you had good, strong family relationships now that you were able to nurture, or they were able to nurture all of you throughout your growing up years.

Piper: Yes. And, I got in trouble just like my siblings did, things like that.

Keninger: How many siblings have you got?

Piper: I have a brother, who is the oldest, and then an older sister and a younger sister.

Keninger: Okay, so you're number three out of the four.

Piper: Third time's a charm! (Laughter)

Keninger: So, you've lived in Vinton since you came back from Oregon?

Piper: Yes.

Keninger: And, you have you worked here? Have you had a job?

Piper: I do Braille proof reading. I've done that probably for the past 20 years. And, I worked here at school in the

computer lab for a brief time. It was just during summer school. And, I also did some child care for about seven years.

Keninger: How about community activities? Are you...Your roots are here in Vinton, obviously, and you live here. Do you participate in any community activities, church or clubs, or I don't know, anything along that order?

Piper: Right now it's kind of a lull. For a long time I was in the community choir that we had, and unfortunately that's not meeting anymore. And, our Vinton chapter of ICUB is no more. Everyone sort of got old and passed away. And, our JC's chapter is no more. So, it seems like everything I join dies. (Laughter)

Keninger: Oh dear!

Piper: I don't believe it's because I joined. I don't have that attitude, but.

Keninger: Is Vinton a thriving community these days, or is it kind of struggling like a lot of small towns?

Piper: I really think its struggling. That would be my perception, unfortunately.

Keninger: There are a number of people who have been graduates of the Braille school who have located in Vinton for the long term, who live here. Is that a close community, or do you see that as, what do I want to say, just kind of just part of the landscape, part of the larger community?

Piper: Sometimes I think that I would almost describe it as two little, tiny communities. There seem to be, and I think it's an age related thing. There seem to be some of the older blind people that are close to one another and then the group that I am in seems to be kind of the middle age group that are close to one another.

Keninger: Talk to me about advocacy. Talk to me about...I know that you've been involved in, for example, the issue with the residential program here, whether it should be closed or not, and what shape it should have. Can you talk about that?

Piper: It's sort of hard to talk about it, knowing that it is gone. I think that's a mistake. I really believe that there should be a residential program. I liked the idea that people had about five or six years ago, where it was short-term. Like, maybe children would come here for a semester or even with summer programs. Maybe they should be doing more with that. I guess, what I fear in what appears to me to be what's going on with students, is they're just not receiving enough time with their TVI. I don't know if it's because there aren't enough TVI's, or if it is because the TVI's don't always...Let's, for example, they don't always have a Braille reading student every year. I heard someone say that she had not had a Braille reading student for eighteen years, and now she's being presented with having to teach a Braille Note. Well, she's having to brush up on it herself. And, I think that's the problem. I don't think that they have the consistency where they can stay up on all of

the technology and the techniques like the teachers did here.

Somewhere the students have to get a good feeling about themselves, about their blindness. And, I think a lot of that needs to come when they're young so that they can go out there and advocate for themselves, because there is a time when they're going to have to. I truly believe that; even if it's just going out and making the decision to purchase a home, or something like that. They need to know that they can find people to hire to help get their things done. I don't know, sometimes I really fear for them.

Keninger: Certainly is a different approach. And, whether it's going to be affective is still, the jury's out.

Piper: I have vowed that I will help in any way that I'm able to. I'm hoping that somehow the Alumni Association can be a resource.

Keninger: Tell me about the Alumni Association.

Piper: Well, we have been in existence, now, for almost six years. And, we're sort of small right now. I think most of the population is, oh, I would say 50 or younger. And, I think right now, within the past year at least, we've been focused primarily on history; preserving the history of Iowa Braille. We do sponsor the reunions that are held every year here. And, we have fund raising and are always open to new endeavors. We're hoping that as time goes on more people will see us, and they'll choose to join. It's kind of scary, though, kind of discouraging, because a lot of the younger

students did not attend here at all, and therefore probably would not join our group.

Keninger: The reunions that you sponsor every year, tell me a little bit about those.

Piper: Well, this year's is the second week of June, weekend in June. It begins on Thursday the 9th and ends on Sunday morning the 12th. Most of the activities, well, the talent show, but business meeting, the banquet; they all take place on Saturday. On Friday the people that come will participate in, like, beeper ball or goal ball or they will tour as much of the campus as they are allowed to tour, and just sort of mingle. We have hay rides. It's a lot of fun.

Keninger: How many people do you usually have at the reunions?

Piper: Oh, anywhere from probably 40 to 65. I think last year at our banquet we had 65.

Keninger: Other organizations. You say that you belonged to ICUB for a while...

Piper: I did while the Vinton chapter was in existence. I don't now.

Keninger: You don't belong to the state organization?

Piper: No.

Keninger: Is there a reason why you choose one organization over the other, or do you, I mean ICUB versus NFBI? Or do you see that as a, just whatever's available in town? I mean, I'm just curious.

Piper: Actually, I've been a member of NFBI as well. And I, it's really too bad that the two can't come together. I can see positives and negatives on both of them. I think that the philosophy that runs in the NFBI is very, very powerful. They kind of push that pendulum pretty far one way; but for some people that's necessary. And, I think there are times in a person's life, maybe because of the experiences that they've had, maybe they need a little bit of that. But, it's just too bad the two groups can't come together. I think it would be really profitable.

Keninger: For the benefit of somebody listening to this who doesn't know what you and I know, can you describe that philosophy as you see it?

Piper: Oh boy! (Laughter) Well, of course it's Kenneth Jernigan's. Well, probably Jacobus tenBroek's philosophy; but so many of Kenneth Jernigan's speeches portray it. That everyone, regardless of whether you have useable vision, is considered a blind person. And, I don't necessarily disagree with that. Sometimes I think it creates confusion among the public though. And, as I perceive the philosophy, the NFB basically feels that a blind person can do anything that he wishes to do, and the end justifies the means. That's where I sort of veer away from that. I don't think that the end always justifies the means.

Keninger: What would be an example of that? That would illustrate what you mean there?

Piper: It might be partially a personality issue with me, but for example, I would not...If I were told that I could not sit on a window exit seat on the plane, I certainly would not get out of the plane and join a picket line, or something such as that. I wouldn't create that much of a disruption because I wasn't allowed to sit at the window exit. I would probably...If I really felt like I needed to, I would handle it another way. I realize that if that's important to someone, then they're right in what they've done, but that just wouldn't...That's not my way of doing things.

Keninger: Sure. Okay I think that illustrates the point.

Piper: I don't like it when the flight attendant takes my long cane and puts it in a closet. But, my solution to that is to have a folding cane in my purse, so I'm not caneless. And, I give her instructions, "Please do not let anything happen to that cane, or you'll be replacing it!" (Laughter) So, nothing has happened to it yet. So that's good. I've had the same cane since 1983. (Laughter)

Keninger: Oh my! Okay. Well, I appreciate you taking this much time. And, I expect that I will be back to finish up, because I think there's more to talk about.

Piper: I hope I've given you something that you can use.

Keninger: Oh, absolutely!

29:28
(End of Recording)

Beverly Tietz
7-23-2011